

Grant Funding Powers Enterprize Zone Commission's Work, but Lack of Stable Support Slows Broader Progress

From a \$250,000 estate planning grant to a \$1.9 million historic preservation sub-grant and support for anchor projects in Frederiksted, Christiansted, and Charlotte Amalie, the EZC said grant funding remains essential to carrying out much of its work.

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Grant funding has become central to the work of the Enterprise Zone Commission, with Managing Director Nadine Marchena-Kean telling commissioners Thursday that major parts of the agency's estate planning, business development, historic preservation, and anchor-project work have depended on securing outside support.

Presenting the commission's annual report under the theme "Collaboration Equals Community Benefits," Ms. Marchena-Kean outlined how multiple grants were used to fund specific programs and projects, while also stressing that limited recurring funding continues to slow the agency's broader progress.

In her report, Ms. Marchena-Kean said the commission received and administered several grants, including a \$250,000 award from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs to expand its estate planning work.

According to her presentation, that funding supported several activities, including an estate planning conference, the launch of a pilot program to help families understand and navigate estate planning, and the creation of an estate planning landing page on the VIEDA website.

Ms. Marchena-Kean also reported that a \$125,000 State Trade Expansion Program grant from the U.S. Small Business Administration was used to support three businesses participating in the Fancy Food Show in New York City.

She further disclosed that a delegation of 11 companies attended the Trinidad and Tobago Trade and Investment Conference and Trade Show, which reportedly drew more than 25,000 attendees. Together, the two activities exposed local businesses to thousands of industry contacts in regional and international markets, she said.

Historic preservation work also received major support through grant funding. Ms. Marchena-Kean reported that the commission administered a \$1.9 million sub-grant from the State Historic Preservation Office for the restoration of 11 historic buildings.

She said nine of those restoration projects have already been completed. The work included clearing hurricane damage, repairing shutters, doors, and windows, and rebuilding galleries.

According to Ms. Marchena-Kean, some of the owners of the restored properties had previously been advised to demolish the buildings, but the grant funding made it possible to rehabilitate them to a standard that would allow them to return to active use.

Grant funding also helped move forward two of the commission's three anchor projects: the Jarvis Building in Frederiksted and the Marcelli Building on St. Croix.

Ms. Marchena-Kean said a portion of a half-million-dollar grant from the Office of Insular Affairs was used for hurricane repairs on the Jarvis Building.

She also reported that a \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture was used to install a commercial kitchen in the Marcelli Building. According to Ms. Marchena-Kean, the facility is the first of its kind and will allow entrepreneurs to obtain short-term leases to produce food products for sale.

The third anchor project, the Padilla Building in Charlotte Amalie, was purchased using part of a \$2 million legislative allocation. Ms. Marchena-Kean said it will also be developed into an agro-food center, similar to the Marcelli Building on St. Croix.

She added that both centers will also benefit from funding from a \$6 million Community Development Block Grant received from the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority.

Despite the range of projects completed or advanced through grants, Ms. Marchena-Kean said the commission's progress continues to be limited by the amount of time and effort required to secure funding.

"For every grant...we have applied for five or six grants in order to get that one grant," she told commissioners. "If there was a constant funding source...we'd be able to move in a direction and work even faster."

She said the funding bottleneck is the only factor preventing staff from achieving more of the organization's strategic goals.

"We spend a lot of time applying for grants, and that is our only challenge."

"It's not that we don't have the will to do the work, it's that we don't have the financial structure to support us."